

# What happens when reality TV starts getting real

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Fantasia Barrino's VH1 reality show will return weeks after she was hospitalized for an overdose.

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Fantasia's overdose is the latest real-life drama to occur within a reality show

VH1 says it has not decided yet how it will deal with the issue on the new season

Professor says such events make reality TV "look even more authentic"

"Deadliest Catch" producer said show tried to deal sensitively with the death of its star

**(CNN)** -- Fans of Fantasia Barrino's reality show "Fantasia For Real" won't have long before they learn if the series will live up to its name.

The second season of the VH1 show premieres September 19, after the singer's overdose following allegations about her relationship with a married man.

The incident raises the issue of how reality shows handle the troubles and tragedies of their stars before an audience expecting an insider's view of the subjects' lives.

"In a word, you handle it carefully," said Stephen Reverand, senior vice president of development and production, East Coast, for the [Discovery Channel](#), which grappled with how to portray the death of "Deadliest Catch" star Capt. Phil Harris this year. "You handle it carefully and sensitively."

For many viewers, "reality television" has become a complete misnomer.

But real life often does intrude on those series, as in the case of Barrino's medical and romantic troubles, the recent arrest of MTV's "Jersey Shore" star Snooki and the divorce of Jon and Kate Gosselin, which halted their very successful reality show.

As long as there has been reality TV, there appears to have been unexpected drama that becomes part of the story line.

MTV's "Real World" has countless examples, including then-Tami Roman's decision to undergo an abortion on "The Real World: Los Angeles" in 1993; the late Pedro Zamora's living with AIDS on "The Real World: San Francisco" the following year; and Ruthie Alcaide's struggle with alcohol on "The Real World: Hawaii" in

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Celebrity Watch | [TV Department of Media and Cultural Studies at the University of California, Riverside](#), said the portrayal of human drama precedes the reality show model.

He cites graphic and intimate headlines and drawings in newspapers hundreds of years ago that were meant to intrigue and attract an audience. Miller said reality shows are merely continuing that tradition in "trying to deal with intense passions that will excite and drive the audience."

Barrino's story is made all the more intriguing to the public, he said, because of her well-documented struggles with illiteracy, poverty and single motherhood.

"She's good copy," he said. "When another trauma comes along, that just adds grist to the mill and also makes reality TV look even more authentic. So while we know these shows are often tightly scripted with the voice-overs, editing and such, there's the sense of 'Look, we didn't make this happen.' "

TV blogger [Joe Bua](#) said production companies may not always be culpable in the drama, but participants are very aware of what could happen on their shows.

"The agreement is implicit here that if you are signing up for a reality show, everything that happened during that time is up for grabs," Bua said. "With Fantasia, this is not her first reality show, even though "Idol" is much more tightly controlled."

In the days since Barrino's release from the hospital, blogs and internet sites have featured photos of her and Antwaun Cook -- the married man at the center of the scandal -- being filmed purportedly for the new season of her show.

VH1 has not commented on the pictures but released the following statement: "At this moment it's too soon for us to speak to how these events will change the show and or if anything will be re-worked for the premiere of VH1's 'Fantasia For Real.' "

Discovery Channel executive Reverand declined to comment on how other networks handle personal tragedies. His network has been hailed for its sensitive portrayal of the death of Harris, the fishing boat captain, from a pulmonary embolism on "Deadliest Catch." The episode attracted 8.5 million viewers.

Reverand said Harris insisted that his final days be filmed.

"He made it very clear that he wanted his fight to survive documented in every way in the course of the program," Reverand said. "He even in his last days wrote a note to the cameraman who had become a very close friend of his, Todd Stanley, and the note saying 'Keep the cameras rolling, the story needs an ending.' "

Thom Beers, chief executive officer and executive producer for Original Productions, which oversees "Deadliest Catch," said they sought to balance the audience's need for access with allowing Harris and his family their dignity.

"Obviously, there was no road map for this for us," Beers said. "We knew that we had to deal with it incredibly tastefully and sensitively."

To that end, Beers said, they declined to film Harris' exact moment of death.

It remains to be seen how Barrino's show will portray her latest troubles. Much has been made in the media about whether the coverage of her affair with Cook played a role in the overdose.

In "The Case Against Celebrity Gossip," [Newsweek](#) writer Allison Samuels discusses the perceived intimacy the public has with celebrities because of the access allowed via social networking, celebrity blogs and reality shows.

That leaves fans believing they possess "the right to judge celebs as harshly as we would our actual friends," as demonstrated by what happened after Barrino and Cook's relationship became public after a lawsuit filed by his estranged wife.

"Barrino was reportedly so distraught by the news -- and the vicious and mean comments posted by fans on celebrity blogs -- that she took a mix of sleeping pills and aspirin to shut it all out," Samuels wrote. "That's an interesting and sad turn for a celebrity who was created by a television show that allowed viewers to call in and vote on her success. Now they're apparently voting on her morality as well."

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